From: The Institute of World Politics
To: Murphy, David (SHF)
Subject: Reminder: Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iraq and Syria Panel
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You are cordially invited to a panel on the topic of
Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iraq and Syria
with
Bassam Ishak, **Loay Mikhael**, and **Sinam Mohamad**

Thursday, November 1st
4:00 - 5:00 PM

The Institute of World Politics
1521 16th Street NW

Washington, D.C.

Parking

Register

About the Panel: Iraq and Syria have become major sources of instability in the Middle East, drawing in Islamic extremists from around the world, sending floods of refugees outside of their borders, and seeing genocide at the hands of the Islamic State. The societies of both Iraq and Syria have suffered much from Baathist politics and ideology, which has in many ways set the stage for much of the dysfunction and problems that we are seeing in those countries today – a factor not usually recognized in analyses of events there. Events within Iraq and Syria have also been influenced by external actors jockeying for influence and in pursuit of their own geopolitical goals. In each country, however, there are hopeful signs, despite all of the tragedy. The dynamics in Syria and Iraq are related, yet distinct and different.

This panel will explore the distinct dynamics in each country as well as some common dynamics, the changing role of the United States in the region, the role of other external factors such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf States, and will examine what the economic and political future may look like for ethnic

and religious minorities in both countries. In Iraq, where the Christian population has dropped by approximately 90% since 2003 and where Yazidis have suffered genocide along with their Christian neighbors, the future role and status of ethnic and religious minorities is critical to that country's stability and future. The Iraqi panelist, **Loay Mikhael**, is an Iraqi Christian, now living in the Washington, D.C. area.

In Syria, approximately 30% of Syrian territory, located in the northeast of the country, is governed by the Self-Administration of North and East Syria, which was announced on 6 September 2018, is heavily populated by Syrian Kurds, along with Arab, Christian and other minorities. The legislature for this body is the Syrian Democratic Council. Two of our panelists, **Bassam Ishak**, a Syrian Christian, and **Sinam Sherkany**, a Kurdish Muslim, are part of the SDC, and represent the SDC here in Washington, D.C. They will discuss how they are attempting to build a pluralistic society with protections for freedom of religion, speech, and dissent, in the midst of the chaos of the Syrian civil war.

This panel will be moderated by IWP Research Professor Paul Coyer, who specializes in the role of religion in foreign affairs and who spent time this past summer with the Yazidi and Christian communities of northern Iraq.

About the Panelists:

Bassam Ishak is a Syriac Syrian Christian native of the northeastern province of Hassakeh, Syria. Mr. Ishak is a long tme dissident of the Baath regime in Syria. He was born in Damascus in 1959, the son of the late Said Ishak, long-tme member of the Syrian Parliament (1932-1954). Mr. Ishak was executive director of the organization Syrian Human Rights, SAWASIA, in Damascus from 2004 tll late 2011, and was travel banned by the Syrian regime from 2006 tll mid 2011 for his human rights activities. Mr. Ishak twice ran for Syrian Parliament in his native Hassakeh and received the highest votes of independent candidates but was denied his seat by the Assad regime. He was forced to leave Syria in Sept. 2011. Since then he has been active in working to build a democratic, pluralistic Syria from outside his homeland. In August of 2012 Mr. Ishak co-founded with other Syriac activists, NGO’s, and independent Syrian Syriac politicians, the Syriac National Council of Syria which strive to promote a vision for a new pluralistic Syria that is based on democracy and fundamental citizenship rights. Mr Ishak was also one of the founders of the Syrian National Coalition in Doha in 2013. In 2015 he joined the Syrian Democratic Council, the governing body that rules the 30% of Syria that is

autonomous and is in the northeast of the country. He is a member of the SDC's General Secretariat as well as one of itsrepresentatives in the United States. Mr. Ishak has also worked as a trainer/lecturer for a faith basedreconciliation workshops in Syria, Egypt, Turkey, and Kurdistan Iraq. Mr. Ishak holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the Catholic University of America in Washington DC, and a master’s degree in the management of ethno-political conflict from Royal Roads University in Canada. He is married and has three children.

Loay Mikhael is the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian Popular Council as well as its representative in Washington, D.C. He also serves as Senior Advisor to Iraq Haven, an NGO that seeks to create secured special economic zones within Iraq that enable Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities to return to their homes and rebuild their lives, as well as Deputy Chairman of the Soraya Charity Organization of the Nineveh Plain. He has previously worked as Operations Manager for the Mines Advisory Group as well as for UNESCO in Iraq. Loay speaks English, Arabic, Kurdish and neo-Aramaic. He has published in numerous newspapers and journals and is a regular speaker and conference participant discussing the challenges facing Christians in Iraq and the broader Middle East.

Sinam Mohamad is a Syrian Kurd and is the Representative of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) to the United States. The Syrian Democratic Council is the ruling body that governs approximately 30% of Syria, which governing body is made up of Kurdish Muslims, Arab Muslims, and Syriac and Armenian Christians, and is premised on freedom of religion, mutual tolerance and pluralism. (The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which have partnered with the US and allied militaries in the fight against the Islamic State are the military forces of the Syrian Democratic Council.) Sinam was born in Damascus, Syria, and earned a degree in English Literature from the University of Aleppo in 1981. She was co-President of the People’s Council of Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), the supreme political body of the liberated areas of northern and north eastern Syria from 2011 to 2014, when it was superseded by the current, pluralistic SDC. Sinam is a also member of the leadership of The Star Congress, which is a movement that advocates for women’s rights in Syria. She was nominated for the Syrian Parliament twice, in 2003 and 2007, but because of her Kurdish identity she couldn't win. Sinam is married with four children.

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